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ASIA

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A preview of Hollywood's serious season

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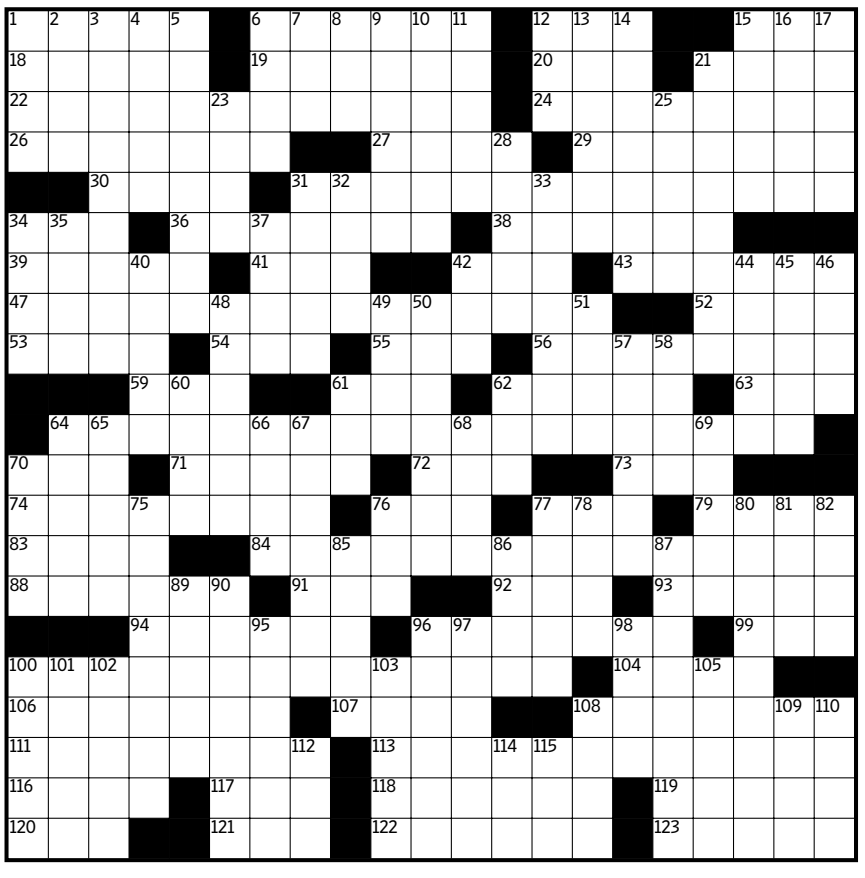

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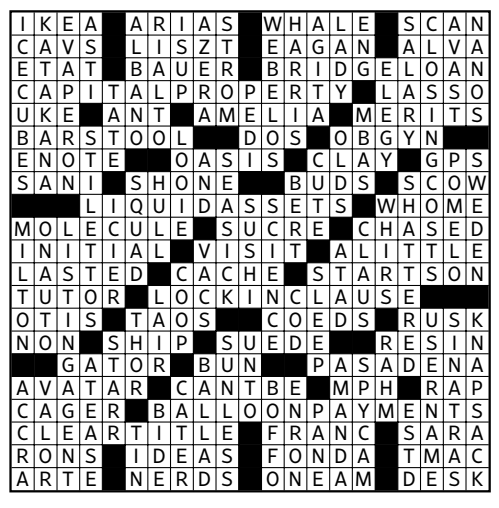

Russian revolution

The czarist is prized over the contemporary as buyers storm back

By Kelly Crow

Christie's (vase, painting); Sotheby's (box, salt chair)

Left, Nicholas Roerich's 'Legend, from the series Messiah,' carried a low estimate of $1.1 million at Christie's. Below, a couple of knickknacks from Sotheby's: left, a gold and enamel box given by Czar Nicholas II to his aunt and uncle, with a top estimate of $148,347, sold for $991,040; right, a salt chair in silver and champlevé enamel, with a top estimate of $9,878, sold for $124,557.

Russian oligarchs and bigwigs who buoyed, then fled, the art market are stepping back in. But rather than embracing the latest contemporary artists, they're chasing the collections of an earlier elite class—from the time of the czars.

London's chief auction houses Sotheby's and Christie's International planned this past week to sell at least $36 million worth of Russian art, in a series of sales called Russia Week. But at a Monday evening auction at Sotheby's, Romanov heirlooms that had been expected to bring in up to $1.5 million instead brought $11.6 million, including $1 million for a golden, jeweled Fabergé Imperial cigarette case—nearly nine times the high estimate and a record for a Fabergé cigarette case. The buyer was a private American collector.

Like many collecting categories, the Russian art market was gutted by the recession, but price levels for top artists have begun to stabilize, in part because of a fresh influx of Russian and Ukrainian buyers from banking and political circles. The group of newcomer collectors include Alina Aivazova, the wife of Kiev's mayor Leonid Kosmos Chernovetsky, who in June paid boutique auctioneer MacDougall's $2.3 million for "Portrait of Madame Alisa Rivoir with a Lapdog," by Ilya Repin, a Ukrainian who became Russia's leading late 19th-century realist.

Sotheby's says at least 38% of the buyers at its June round of London art sales were new to its Russian department. Nearly a quarter were newcomers to the auction house altogether. From Moscow to Kiev to Kazakh expatriates living in London, demand is growing once more for Russian silver, gilded porcelain vases and 19th-century paintings of peasant women in colorful head scarves. Less popular now are those contemporary stars who enjoyed huge price jumps during the market's peak, and auction houses have tailored the latest offerings to suit traditional tastes.

This vase from Nicholas I's porcelain factory sold for $591,005 at Christie's.

Sotheby's scored a coup when it consigned the Romanov heirlooms, once owned by Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich and his wife, Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna. The duchess, by then a widow, fled to Paris to escape the 1918 Russian Revolution. At her request, a friend loaded a pair of cotton pillowcases with the couple's collection of cigarette cases and cuff links and dropped them off at the Swedish Legation in St. Petersburg. The duchess died before ever claiming the goods, which languished at the Swedish Foreign Office in Stockholm until being rediscovered in January.

The pieces were sold by the couple's heirs. Collectors from Russia and the U.S. must have fallen hard for the storied history because they bought every item, including the pillowcases. Priced at about $330, one went for $7,829 and the other for $9,889, including the buyer's premium.

The priciest lot was that $1 million cigarette case, given by Empress Alexandra Feodorovna to the couple on their 25th wedding anniversary; it had been priced to sell for up to $115,000. A green Fabergé case that was a gift from their nephew Czar Nicholas II was bought by a private Russian collector for $991,040, more than six times its top estimate. (It contained a handwritten note from the czar, signed "Nicky.")

Not everything offered during Russia week went soaring past its top estimates. After the heirloom auction Monday, Sotheby's held a sale of Russian paintings, including Alexandra Exter's "Venice," a colorful collage reminiscent of Fernand Leger that sold for $1.7 million, just over its $1.4 million low estimate, and "Cossack," a Repin portrait of a bandaged soldier that carried a $955,000 low estimate and did not sell. But several items fared well during Sotheby's Tuesday afternoon sale, including an 1879 silver and enamel salt chair that brought $124,557—12 times its high estimate.

Overall, Sotheby's expectation at the start of the week was that it would bring in at least $24.6 million from its Russian art sales. Christie's expected to bring in at least $11.5 million, led by Nicholas Roerich's sea-green panorama, "Legend, from the series Messiah," priced to go for at least $1.1 million at a sale Wednesday. Christie's sold a similar Roerich for $2.9 million in the spring, when the economic picture was gloomier.

Christie's sale Tuesday night included a large two-handled vase made in Czar Nicholas I's Imperial Porcelain Factory that sold for $591,005, well over its $409,000 high estimate. Christie's international director of Russian art, Alexis de Tiesenhausen, says newer collectors typically anchor their Russian porcelain collection with pieces from the mid-1800s, when the royal factories reached the peak of craftsmanship.

"Russian collectors have grown bored of the crisis," Mr. Tiesenhausen said. "We lost a few clients, but others have finally arrived."

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Driving Chinese golf

The sport's Olympic status is expected to mean more official support

By Jonathan Cheng

Shenzhen, China

We're terribly sorry to report this, but there are some people on Earth who don't have the highest regard for golf. They say it's an elitist pastime for fancy people and garden-party intellectuals—more of a leisure pursuit than the sort of activity that cultivates one's muscles.

In China, where the game hardly existed a quarter of a century ago, that stereotype has persisted. It was the nation's wealthiest classes that first adopted the game, building exclusive private courses like Shenzhen's sprawling Mission Hills Golf Club, which has 12 courses of 18 holes each, making it the world's largest golf complex.

The popular ranks of the nation's athletes, however, the ones who are ambitious about leveraging their talent, don't pay the sport much attention. The government, which controls the sports scene with its lavish spending on development programs, has anointed tennis, soccer, basketball and table tennis as the mandatory school sports. In the past four years alone, about 800,000 basketball courts have been built in China, pushing the estimated number of players to as many as 400 million.

But what the promise of a Masters Tournament green jacket can't accomplish, the lure of a gold medal just might.

Since the International Olympic Committee announced in October that golf will be a medal sport starting in 2016, China's golf leaders have been bursting with optimism. They have started pushing Beijing to build public driving ranges and courses in hopes of incubating talent.

Last month, Mission Hills wrapped up its first-ever Asian Amateur Championship tournament, held in conjunction with Augusta National Golf Club and Scotland's Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews. Thanks to those relationships, the tournament's winner got an automatic invitation to next year's Masters.

Mission Hills also announced plans to launch its own Chinese junior tour in January, with biweekly 18-hole tournaments and an annual membership fee of 500 yuan, or about $73.

"These steppingstones are crucial to our mission of nurturing the next Tiger Woods," says Tenniel Chu, executive director of Mission Hills. After the Olympics announcement, Mr. Chu said, "golf is no longer an elitist sport—it's an official sport in the Chinese world."

Before the IOC's announcement, one of the most ambitious things the China Golf Association had said was that the country could have 20 million recreational golfers by 2020; the U.S. has about 26 million.

But since the Olympic vote, the sport's backers in China seem to have raised their sights a bit. At the announcement of the Chinese junior tour, Xu Deli, chairman of the provincial-level Guangdong Golf Association, said, "We want to produce not just one Tiger Woods, but many Tiger Woods. In 2016, I hope that some of these golfers will be part of that competition."

For golf to prosper here, it will need more public facilities and a stronger amateur circuit to cultivate young talent. Mr. Chu says China still has fewer than 100 amateur tournaments a year, compared with 600-plus each year in the U.S. China also will need more and better golf instruction (Mission Hills has three golf academies) and, eventually, some domestic stars. "All we need is a local hero—a Yao Ming of golf would be tremendous for the sport," Mr. Chu says.

One of the great hopes so far in Chinese golf is a 21-year-old named Han Ren, who shot a few holes with Mr. Woods when the U.S. star visited in 2001. That event "was really one of the moments that motivated me" Mr. Han says now. "I've never played a round with more than five spectators, but when I was with Tiger it was 5,000 people, and I was kind of nervous. But I knew I also wanted to be on that stage."

Still, without an ecosystem to thrive in back home, Mr. Han was sent overseas to take his game to the next level—first to Canada in 2003 and then to Indiana University in the U.S., where he is a junior.

"The sport is not yet that popular in China, although I can see it growing so much bigger in the next decade," Mr. Han says. "I don't attract a huge crowd when I play every time, but I feel a huge difference; there's so much more support from spectators in Asia compared to three or four years ago."

Mr. Han plans to go pro after college, hopefully in the U.S., though he also says he plans to spend some time in Asia to "launch my career."

Mr. Han returned to Shenzhen for the Asian amateur tournament. After shooting a 65, he took a quick lead ahead of his South Korean and Australian rivals, only to cede his position on day two. In the end, the top Chinese finisher placed 11th, with competitors from Australia, New Zealand and golf-crazy South Korea in the top six spots.

If Chinese golf officials have reason to believe they can dominate golf in coming years, their best argument may be the trajectory of tennis. That sport, which also suffered from an elitist image, benefited from an infusion of government funding after being reinstated as an Olympic medal sport in 1988.

The global men's and women's tours quickly moved to sign television deals and line up international tournaments in big cities such as Shanghai. China last year won a bronze medal in women's doubles at the Beijing Games, and now counts three top-50 players on the global women's tour.

Dan Washburn, a Shanghai-based writer who is researching a book on golf in China, says that if there are medals to be had in golf, China will try its hardest to produce medalists. "They'll train them from a young age, and they'll be state-funded, like other Olympic sports," he says. Given China's track record at the Beijing Games, where it won 51 gold medals, the most of any nation, it might be a bad idea to bet against it on the golf course.

The 12-course Mission Hills Golf Club is taking a lead role in trying to turn China into a global power, including by hosting the annual World Cup tournament, seen here.

Already, the infrastructure for the game is growing at a furious pace. Mr. Chu at Mission Hills likes to point out that the world's next-largest golf complex, North Carolina's Pinehurst Resort, celebrated its centennial by opening its eighth course. Mission Hills opened its 12th golf course in 2004, just a dozen years after breaking ground on the first. When it started, Mr. Chu says, there were fewer than six golf courses and 50,000 golfers in the country.

In its early days, Mission Hills won official approval more for its economic benefits than for any athletic reasons—local bureaucrats liked that the golf course brought jobs and businesses to the area, while raising property values. The Chus cultivated ties with local sporting officials as well as golf's luminaries in Scotland and the U.S.

In 1995, Mission Hills hosted China's first-ever televised golf tournament. In 2001, it brought Mr. Woods to Shenzhen. And in 2007, Mr. Chu struck a 12-year deal to host the World Cup of Golf, an annual tournament for pairs of players representing 28 countries around the globe. This year's, won by Italy, took place last weekend. (China tied for 22nd.)

Whatever becomes of China's young aspirants like Mr. Han, golf's mainstream popularity in the country is still many years away. Land is expensive, and official concerns about the growing wealth gap in a country that still has 600 million farmers have led the government to impose a nominal moratorium on new golf courses.

"Golf will continue to grow in participation in China as the economy grows, but I don't think it'll become a mainstream game because of the resources necessary," says Mr. Washburn, the writer. "It's going to be an elitist and prohibitively expensive sport in China for the foreseeable future."

One of Chinese golf's great hopes is Han Ren, a 21-year-old player who has been honing his game in Canada and the U.S. since 2003.

Associated Press (Mission Hills); Getty Images (Han)

Game within a game

Filmmakers take a risky shot with the mystical 'Golf in the Kingdom'

Golf in the Kingdom LLC

Michael (Mason Gamble) putting, right, and with the starter (Jim Urbina), above

Golf Journal
JOHN PAUL NEWPORT

Burbank, California

A couple of weeks ago this column looked at Hollywood's struggle to make big, commercially successful golf movies. Many readers wrote in declaring their affection for several films I didn't mention, in particular "The Greatest Game Ever Played," about Francis Ouimet's implausible victory at the 1913 U.S. Open. I agree: this was a fine golf movie, based on Mark Frost's even better book of the same name.

But sadly the film's appeal didn't seem to extend much beyond members of the golf tribe. It grossed just $15 million at the U.S. box office—not much more than the $12 million pulled in by "Caddyshack II," possibly the worst sequel to any movie in any genre ever made. "Bobby Jones: Stroke of Genius," another movie that many Golf Journal readers said they liked, sold only $2.7 million in tickets at U.S. theaters.

Perhaps that's why, when I sat down recently here with the principals behind the long-awaited movie version of "Golf in the Kingdom," they practically leaped over each other to insist that their film wasn't likely to be a blockbuster, either.

"There's no sex, not much action, and a lot about metaphysical concepts," said Mindy Affrime, the producer. "It's funny and speaks to how sport can enlighten your life. But how do you label a movie like that? It's definitely not a romantic comedy."

"Americans know how to do westerns and car chases really well," said Michael Murphy, the author of "Golf in the Kingdom." "But rendering the mystical in film is not something we have much experience with. This is undiscovered country."

Mr. Murphy's book, the best-selling golf novel of all time, was published in 1972 and has sold more than 1.5 million copies. Filmmakers have optioned it continually ever since, including Clint Eastwood for many years, but it never came close to production until last spring, when it was finally shot at the Bandon Dunes golf resort in Oregon. Release is hoped for by next summer.

"Those option checks were like an annuity," said Mr. Murphy, a yoga-fit 79-year-old. Much of the proceeds went to support the Esalen Institute, a nonprofit New Age retreat and study center on California's Big Sur coastline that Mr. Murphy co-founded in 1962.

The very attributes that make the book so charming burdened the film project. The book describes a journey, but almost entirely a mental one. The boiled-down plot: A young American named Michael, en route to study Eastern religions in India in 1956, stops in Scotland to play golf. By chance he hooks up with a charismatic pro named Shivas Irons, who is giving an on-course playing lesson and invites Michael along. After the round they repair to a home in the village for an alcohol-fueled evening of tale spinning and conversation with local players, followed by a wee-hours search back on the course for a mystical savant named Seamus MacDuff. In a bow to the game's history, they hit some "featherie" balls—used in the 17th and 18th centuries—with an ancient shillelagh.

The book's signature phrase is "true gravity," which (to give the uninitiated a taste of the prose) Mr. Irons describes as "the deeper lines o' force, the deeper structure of the universe. But this is the thing, ye can only know wha' it is by livin' into it yerself...Ye see, Michael, merely shootin' par is second best. Goin' for results like that leads men and cultures and entire worlds astray. But if you do it from the inside ye get the results eventually and everythin' else along with it." In another famous passage, Mr. Irons advises, "Let the nothingness into yer shots."

For the first quarter-century of discussions about the movie, Sean Connery was the favorite to portray Shivas Irons. But at age 79, he has all but stopped acting, and some of the scripts didn't call for a Connery-like character anyway. In one version Mr. Murphy recalled, Shivas Irons retires to Tahiti. In another the Michael character is transformed into a used-car salesman from the Bronx. "The people who bought the options put themselves into it. It became their story. But it's really Michael's story and that's the story we're trying to tell," said Ms. Affrime.

That means delving into the deep humor of the game. "People touch these powerful, transcendent little moments when playing golf that they don't usually talk about," said Mr. Murphy. "But they tell me. And this mysticism sets golf up for humor because, let's face it, the game is absurd. Hitting a little ball into a hole! It's funny on the face of it." Shivas Irons may seem crazed, he said, but he's a very happy man who has given his life to the game he loves.

Mr. Murphy and Ms. Affrime, with the support of Mr. Eastwood, jointly purchased the rights to the book from Warner Bros. two years ago and are financing the movie—at a very low budget, Ms. Affrime said—through private investors. David O'Hara, 44, a veteran Scottish actor, plays Mr. Irons and Malcolm MacDowell portrays Peter, the host of the village party.

Ms. Affrime was hesitant to say too much about her vision for the film, apart from disclosing that it closely follows the structure of the book. "We have two months of editing left, so we're really still in the discovery process," she said. "But we want people to have their own reactions. It's a very subjective little art film. I don't want to explain anything in advance because then you're ruining the art."

But clearly, finding ways beyond words to render the "deeper structures" of golf is high on the challenge list. Mr. Murphy said the sound designers have been working hard on ways to differentiate the whoosh of golf balls taking off in different circumstances. "The rush of that sound strikes a primal chord in even the densest," he said. Conversations on the course will sometimes be shown from far away, to reflect how in mid-round a golfer's "field of awareness dilates and he begins to conform to the grandeur of the wide-open spaces around him," he said.

Ms. Affrime also promised the film will be beautiful to look at. "You'll see the love of golf, because at bottom that's what 'Golf in the Kingdom' is about: the love that golfers have for the game and for each other."

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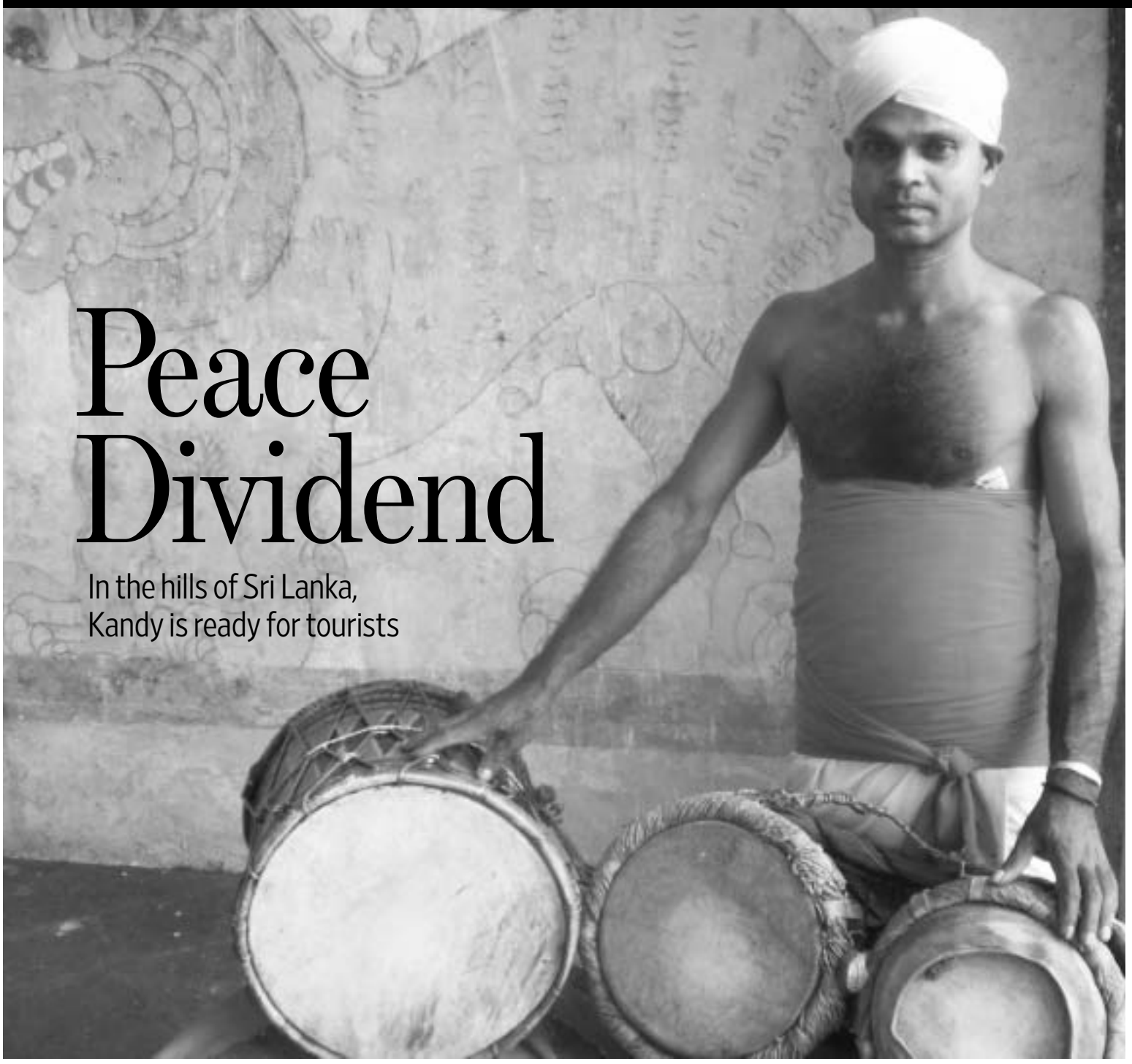

Peace Dividend

In the hills of Sri Lanka, Kandy is ready for tourists

By Robert Schroeder

Kandy, Sri Lanka

To understand the spirit of Kandy, listen to its heartbeat.

It may be heard—rising from the 67-centimeter-long Kandyan drums known as *geta bera*—at the sacred Temple of the Tooth, or during *puja* (devotions) at the Embekke Temple, just outside the ancient city's center. The centuries-old percussive beats connect one of Sri Lanka's biggest cities with its proud past—and are now ready to pound a tattoo into a hopeful future.

Just months after the end of Sri Lanka's decades-long civil war, tourist arrivals to the South Asian island nation are increasing, and Kandyan hoteliers and merchants are hoping to share in the wealth. A Unesco World Heritage site and long a popular tourist destination, Kandy is a showcase of culture, history and religion set in the lush hill country, about 500 meters above sea level.

"Maybe in 2009, 2010, Sri Lanka will be busy because of the tourism," said Tuan Rizan Jamel, front-office executive of Kandy's posh Theva Residency hotel. "Everything is over. We are very happy."

Down the hill from the Theva, at the Temple of the Tooth (or Sri Dalada Maligawa), Prabo Wijetunge agreed.

"People are so relaxed," said Mr. Wijetunge, a Sri Lankan expatriate who was visiting home for the first time in three years. Mr. Wijetunge and his family were among the throngs paying homage inside the 18th-century temple on the north side of Kandy Lake.

Above, Kandy is a drumming capital; right, the Temple of the Tooth holds a relic of the Buddha; far right, art to bathe by at the Theva Residency hotel

Robert Schroeder/The Wall Street Journal

The temple, the city's star architectural attraction, takes its name from the relic it houses: a tooth of the Buddha, kept in a stupa-shaped gold casket. Crowds of Sri Lankan devotees jostle past, carrying offerings of jasmine, lilies or lotus flowers. The tooth is also the focus of Kandy's famed *perahera*, or procession, held for 10 days in the month of Esala (which runs from July into August). The perahera features Kandyan dancing and drumming, and this year drew about 500,000 people on its final day—more than in previous years.

The dates of next year's Esala Perahera haven't been set. But there is ample opportunity to hear Kandyan drumming and watch local dance—Kandyan dancers and drummers are some of Sri Lanka's emblematic symbols—at any time. At the Kandyan Art Association and Cultural Center, a quick walk from the tooth temple on the lake's northeast shore, the sound of a conch shell welcomes visitors to a show. Bare-chested men emerge in blue- and red-fringed white sarongs, with diamond-shaped headgear, beating geta bera with their hands. Women dancers pay graceful tribute to guardian deities and to their gurus. Before the evening is over, the dancers will enact the taming of a cobra and move like peacocks.

While the population is only about 112,000, Kandy is called *Maha Nuwara*, or Great City, by the Sinhalese. It has the feel of a town. Many of its temples, performances and shops are within walking distance of one another. But it's worth hiring a car or tuk-tuk (a motorized three-wheeler) to see, for example, the three temples on the outskirts, Embekke, Lankatilaka and Gadaladeniya. Buddhism came to Sri Lanka from India in the third century B.C., and these 14th-century structures display distinctive Buddhist statuary and paintings—but also honor Hindu gods. The temples are still very much in use, with thrice-daily puja and drumming at the Embekke temple, for instance, and devout Buddhist worship at all three.

The Buddha practiced asceticism before achieving enlightenment, and famously preached that the root cause of suffering is desire. But tourists in Kandy can easily avail themselves of a steam bath or reflexology at one of the city's ayurvedic spas. And while many accommodations in town tend to be pretty basic, there are high-end alternatives. The rooms at the concrete, wood and glass Theva Residency, two kilometers from downtown, are adorned with modern Kandyan art; some are equipped with Jacuzzis. Little more than a year old, it's a world away from much of the other lodging in the area, and that seems to be the idea. Other high-end hotels include the Kandy House and the Kandy Panorama Resort.

Kandy isn't without its hassles for tourists, including persistent touts and unscrupulous tuk-tuk drivers. But escape is as near as the 59-hectare Peradeniya Botanical Gardens, where a visitor can find serenity broken only by the song of one of Sri Lanka's 430-plus species of bird. "Maybe the entire climate—the flora and the fauna—makes people more peaceful" in Kandy, says Bridget Halpé, a longtime resident and music teacher. "There's a soothing influence about them."

Still, Kandy did not emerge from the long Sri Lankan conflict unscathed. In 1998, Tamil Tiger suicide bombers struck at the Temple of the Tooth, damaging the holy building and killing more than a dozen civilians.

But that, a Kandyan might say, was then, and the future is now. Sri Lanka is aiming to attract 2.5 million visitors by 2016. That would be more than five times the number that the country's tourism authority says came last year.

And war, in fact, is the last thing that comes to mind in Kandy, where the best thing to do may actually be nothing at all. Just close your eyes. Count your breaths. And listen to the heartbeat.

Trip planner

The best—that is, the driest—time to visit Kandy is December to March.

The U.S. State Department continues to caution about uncleared land mines and the possibility of Tamil Tiger remnants in Sri Lanka, especially in the north and east. (Kandy is near the center of the island.) You can find details at travel.state.gov; click on "travel warnings."

The Sri Lankan government, more upbeat, has dubbed 2011 "Visit Sri Lanka year" (see www.srilanka.travel and, for Kandy information, www.kandycity.org).

Getting there
Several Kandy-bound trains leave Colombo's Fort Station daily, with the first at 5:55 a.m. A first-class seat in the observation car of the 3:35 p.m. express (arrives 6:15 p.m.) costs 360 rupees (a bit over $3).

Staying there
Higher-end options include the Theva Residency (www.theva.lk), where the penthouse is $400 a night and a suite is $275, and the eight-room Kandy House, which occupies a 200-year-old manor home (www.thekandyhouse.com). The Web site www.kandyhotels.com lists a variety of places to stay.

What to do
Catch Kandyan dance and drumming at the Kandyan Art Association and Cultural Center; tickets are about $4.50. A shop next door offers an excellent selection of local art and crafts.

Admission to the Temple of the Tooth (www.sridaladamaligawa.lk) is about $4.50, with a surcharge of about $1.30 for taking in a camera.

Kandy's Tea Museum (www.pureceylontea.com/teamuseum.htm) explores the history of a key Sri Lankan product.

Travel agent and hotelier Abdul Malik (www.palmgardenkandy.com) rents cars and motorbikes and has four drivers who also act as guides.

The nouveau Nouveau

With this year's crop, Beaujolais claws itself back to respectability

By Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

Robert Caplin for The Wall Street Journal

Clockwise from top: A Nov. 19 tasting of 2009 Beaujolais Nouveau in New York; glasses at the event bear buttons with French expressions; a bottle of Joseph Drouhin at the tasting.

Dave Kuennen has heard all the bah-humbugs. He knows there's a rising tide of Scrooges. But he refuses to give in to them. "It gets me in the mood for the holiday season to come!" he exclaims. So on Thursday night, Nov. 19, he opened seven different, just-arrived 2009 Beaujolais Nouveaux and celebrated into the night with his customers at BrightWines in Minnesota. "It's no longer the craze it used to be," he concedes. "It's something that had its moment and has faded. But it's still an important date in the world of wine. It's a mini-wine holiday."

We couldn't have said that better ourselves.

Back when we were young, or at least younger, Nouveau was a big deal. There was partying everywhere and some genuine excitement surrounding the wine's release. Sure, wine snobs sniffed at Nouveau, but we wonder how many of them had ever visited a winery during or immediately after a harvest, when the fresh juice tastes like the beating heart of the earth. It's a magical time. The closest most of us can get to that feeling is Nouveau when it is just released, and that's why we've always treasured it. Nouveau is part of the whole holiday season for us and just one more way to celebrate the new harvest and new hopes.

Unfortunately, bad things began happening to Nouveau a few years ago. Winemakers, and then pretty much everyone down the line, got greedy. The quality of the wines plunged. At its worst, Nouveau can be thin, with smells of bananas and tastes of anchovies, salt and metal. Too many simply became unpleasant. At the same time, incredibly, prices shot through the roof, making Nouveau a particularly bad bargain compared with an increasing number of value-priced wines on the shelves. After another disastrous tasting in 2006, we almost gave up.

Fortunately, the 2007 wines were the best we'd had in a decade, and prices had come down. Last year, the trend continued. But, alas, it might be too late. Despite hard-core supporters like Mr. Kuennen, Nouveau has largely lost its buzz—not to mention its shelf space. We have conducted a Nouveau tasting for this column every year since 1998, the year the column began, and we had held a Nouveau party for many years before that. Never, in all of those years, did we have as much trouble putting together enough for a tasting as we did this year. We didn't even see some of our old favorites, such as Brun and Tête.

And it's not just Nouveau. As we shopped, we realized that we didn't see Mionetto's delightful Novello, a kind of Italian Nouveau that we used to gulp every year at an Italian restaurant in the plaza of the World Trade Center in New York City. We called Enore Ceola, managing director of Mionetto USA, and he told us that, indeed, no Novello was imported into the U.S. this year.

"Two reasons," Mr. Ceola explained. "One reason is because the economy is really bad. The consumer is watching every dollar. We're not sure people will pay $9.99 for Novello. The second is that this harvest is good but not great." He thinks Novello may return next year.

All that said, we finally did find a good sample of Nouveaux and we put the wines into bags for a blind tasting. And we have good news: The Nouveau this year is very good, continuing a three-year trend. The wines taste like fresh, ripe, just-picked fruit, just as they should. They have bright, lively, juicy flavors that make them great for a party. They also have nice acidity this year, which helps make them food-friendly. Most important of all, as Dottie put it in the middle of a flight, "They taste of immediacy." That, more than anything, is what we always loved about Nouveau—a sense that it will never be better than it is this very minute, as we toast a new harvest. And the prices are reasonable: For instance, the seven offered by Mr. Kuennen ranged from $7.99 to $12.99.

If you have given up on Nouveau, we'd urge you to give it another chance this year, as soon as possible. It's a great party wine—even if it's just a party of two.

What we do and why

It's time for our semiannual note about who we are and what this column is about. Longtime hard-news journalists, we have been writing this column since 1998 and we have been full-time wine writers since 2000. We don't consider this a wine column but a lifestyle column.

We do not accept free wine, free meals or free trips. All of the wine we taste is bought off retail shelves from many states in the U.S. and paid for by The Wall Street Journal, unless noted otherwise (sometimes, for instance, we write about wines we ordered at restaurants or wines from our own cellar).

Getting the wine from shelves is important for many reasons, including this one: It is proof that there are outstanding wines waiting for you at stores. You don't have to be a wine critic to have them. You just need an adventurous spirit and, ideally, a good wine merchant.

In our broad blind tastings, we are not looking to develop a list of specific wines that you should seek out or avoid. Wine distribution is far too haphazard to ever know what wines you will find in stores. Instead, we try to give general advice: Chardonnay from Australia is a bad bet, for instance, while Syrah from Washington state is more reliable. The index that often appears with the column is not meant to be a buying guide, but simply an illustration of what these wines can taste like at their best and what they might cost.

We understand that some people go to stores and look for those specific wines. This is not a good idea for several reasons, including the simple fact that there's no guarantee that you will like a specific wine that we liked.

However, we do urge you to experiment with the kinds of wines we recommend, such as Carmenere from Chile and Sauvignon Blanc from South Africa.

Melanie Grayce West contributed to this column.

The Dow Jones 2009 Beaujolais Nouveau Index

In a blind tasting of 2009 Nouveau, these were our favorites. These are best with a chill. By tradition, Nouveau should be drunk before the end of the year in which it was made, while it is still young and fresh and a symbol of the new harvest. These are the prices we paid, but prices are very flexible—we saw Duboeuf as low as $6.99—and tend to go down with each passing day.

Antonin Rodet. $13.99.
Very Good. **Best of tasting.**
This reminded us of drinking the brand-new vintage at a winery—so fresh, so lively, so utterly unpretentious, like popping a ripe grape right into our mouths. Dottie called it "authentic and honest," which is perfect for a Nouveau. A repeat best of tasting.

Pascal Chatelus. $10.99.
Good/Very Good.
Dark purple color with some jazzy highlights at the edges. Fruity, just-picked, jammy, mouthwatering nose. Lovely, lively tastes.

Georges Duboeuf. $9.99.
Good/Very Good.
We first called this "a little too made," which made us figure, although its label was concealed in a brown bag, that it was the Duboeuf. It seems less rustic, more like a finished wine than others. But as it warmed and opened, it became earthy, with richer fruit than most, and we became increasingly charmed. It's the most interesting Duboeuf Nouveau we can remember. This is a good thing since it's so widely distributed.

Note: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges from Yech to OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious and Delicious! These are the prices we paid at stores in New York. Prices vary widely.

Adult Films

A preview of Hollywood's serious season

By Ethan Smith, Lauren A.E. Schuker, Michelle Kung and Steven Kurutz

In the movie business, there are plenty of good times to open a would-be blockbuster. The summer season begins in April, "A Christmas Carol" comes out right after Halloween and a slew of holiday weekends provide a happy home for marketing blitzes.

But there's only one time reserved, by big studios and independents alike, for Serious Movies for Grown-Ups hoping for a box-office boost: from late November until the end of December. The most obvious factor is the many awards—from Oscars to Golden Globes to Independent Spirit—whose eligibility windows generally end with the calendar year.

There are also critics' year-end lists—and some indescribable chemistry that makes for a nice pairing between the dark, cold conditions that December brings to northern climes and movies that provoke contemplation rather than shell shock.

Other times of year carry different mandates. Paramount Pictures released the big-budget "Transformers" sequel to great success last June, allowing it to play all summer and gross more than $800 million world-wide. The studio released the ultra-low-budget horror thriller "Paranormal Activity" in late September, making more than $100 million at the U.S. box office.

"There's definitely a tone of movie that works on Memorial Day weekend (at the end of May), for example, that feels like a celebration of summer with a sense of adventure and escape," says Rob Moore, Paramount's vice chairman. "Alternatively, around Halloween, audiences respond more to horror films. And during the winter holidays, people are looking for reflection and space."

Herewith, a selection:

THE WHITE RIBBON

A grim look at growing up in rural Germany in the early 20th century and a big winner at Cannes.

"The White Ribbon" is a bleak tale of life a century ago in the German countryside—where, among other horrors, children face brutal canings for minor infractions.

Directed by Austrian Michael Haneke, who previously made the acclaimed "Cache" and "The Piano Teacher," "Ribbon" won the Palme d'Or at this year's Cannes film festival, where Sony Pictures Classics picked up the U.S. distribution rights. The distributor's co-president, Michael Barker, calls the film Mr. Haneke's own "Fanny and Alexander." And while the grim portrayal of life as a child in northern Europe is similar to that of Ingmar Bergman's late-career masterpiece, the spare, black-and-white visuals have more in common with "The Seventh Seal."

IT'S COMPLICATED

Three veteran movie stars and a love triangle.

Meryl Streep stars in this romantic comedy as Jane Adler, a mother with three grown kids—and two adult men fighting over her. Alec Baldwin plays her ex-husband who, though remarried, surfaces in Jane's life at their son's college graduation. Steve Martin plays Adam, an architect hired to remodel Jane's kitchen who ends up focusing on its owner instead.

This classic tale of triangulated desire, combined with a cast that also includes John Krasinski of "The Office," will likely draw crowds to the multiplexes. Universal Pictures also is hoping that with Messrs. Baldwin and Martin lined up to host this year's Academy Awards, "It's Complicated" will evoke Oscar associations in voters' minds. Written, directed, and produced by Nancy Meyers, "It's Complicated," like her earlier "Something's Gotta Give" with Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton, isn't exactly for the teen set. While the latter grossed more than $100 million at the U.S. box office after its 2003 release, film executives always worry about a lack of young-audience appeal.

THE LOVELY BONES

Murder and the afterlife from the maker of "Lord of the Rings."

Based on the best-selling novel by Alice Sebold, "The Lovely Bones" focuses on the harrowing story of Susie Salmon, a 14-year-old girl murdered by her neighbor. Told from the perspective of Susie, played by Saoirse Ronan ("Atonement"), "The Lovely Bones" portrays her family's struggle to grieve and ultimately heal. From her perch in heaven, Susie narrates the film, appearing like a ghost to the family she left behind and helping to trap her killer.

This is rough stuff, but at the helm is Peter Jackson, who directed the "Rings" franchise and produced this summer's indie hit "District 9." Part of "The Lovely Bones" was shot in Mr. Jackson's native New Zealand.

Some marketing executives say its dark premise may scare away audiences, but in early test screenings, Mr. Jackson found that viewers actually wanted to see more suffering, not less, according to reports. Mr. Jackson re-edited parts of the film to include more violence (the rating is PG-13). Paramount Pictures will roll the film out slowly in a limited number of theaters, expanding through December.

'INVICTUS'

'NINE'

'THE LAST STATION'

'CRAZY HEART'

Fox Searchlight ('Heart'); Warner Bros. ('Invictus'); The Weinstein Company ('Nine'); Zephyr Films ('Station')

THE LAST STATION

The private side of Leo Tolstoy and his wife.

As director Michael Hoffman illustrates in his narrative film about Leo Tolstoy's final days, the author of "War and Peace" was hardly immune to tumult in his personal life. A project roughly 20 years in the making, "Station" stars Christopher Plummer as the novelist, who adopted a lifestyle of chastity and asceticism in his old age. Helen Mirren plays his volatile wife Sofya. Acquired by Sony Pictures Classics shortly after the Telluride Film Festival, the film—which also stars James McAvoy as Tolstoy's new assistant and Paul Giamatti as the scheming disciple Chertkov—features a number of strong, awards-bait performances, but a biopic about a grizzled, philosophy-spouting Russian count may not find it easy to go mainstream.

NINE

From the director of "Chicago," a musical starring no fewer than five Oscar-winning actresses.

Expectations are high for director Rob Marshall's adaptation of the Tony Award-winning 1982 musical (itself an adaptation of Federico Fellini's classic film "8½") with music and lyrics by Maury Yeston and a book by Arthur L. Kopit. It stars Daniel Day-Lewis as Guido Contini, an anxiety-ridden 1960s film director besieged by a coterie of women. Those five Oscar-winning actresses—Nicole Kidman, Penélope Cruz, Marion Cotillard, Judi Dench and Sophia Loren—all had to prove their singing and dancing chops in auditions, says producer Marc Platt.

The final film of co-screenwriter Anthony Minghella, who died before the end of production, "Nine" marks Mr. Marshall's return to the movie musical format. His last entry in the genre, 2002's "Chicago," eventually grossed $171 million in the U.S. and won six Academy Awards, including best picture. Adaptations based on hit shows ("Mamma Mia!," "Hairspray") have fared well in recent years, but "Nine," though it has plenty of star wattage, is based on a lesser-known property than the popular "Chicago." The production carries extra high stakes because it's a release from The Weinstein Company, which badly needs hits in the face of a cash squeeze.

INVICTUS

Clint Eastwood tackles the early years of Nelson Mandela's presidency through the lens of the 1995 Rugby World Cup.

Mr. Eastwood, who will turn 80 next May, shows no signs of slowing down. His last film, 2008's "Gran Torino," gained strong reviews and grossed $148 million in the U.S. It was also shot quickly and cheaply.

"Clint's getting a little sensitive about the discussions concerning him coming in under budget and on schedule." says producer Robert Lorenz. "He's all about doing it efficiently, but he's not trying to beat records. He doesn't want people to think that he's cutting corners."

His latest raises no such concerns: It's a historical drama based on Nelson Mandela's attempt to unite white and black South Africans by supporting the South African national rugby team (the Springboks) during the 1995 World Cup, a potentially controversial act given that rugby had been very much associated with the white government and apartheid. (The title refers to a poem by William Ernest Henley that Mr. Mandela gives to team leader Francois Pienaar, played by Matt Damon.) Co-star Morgan Freeman has long wanted to make a film about Mr. Mandela, whom he met after directing 1993's apartheid drama "Bopha!" Risks: the film clocks in at 133

'UP IN THE AIR'

From boom to bust

By Lauren A. E. Schuker

When "Juno" director Jason Reitman began scouting locations in Detroit and St. Louis for "Up in the Air," the film—about a corporate consultant who flies from city to city, lives hub to hub, and fires people for a living—was going to be a lighthearted comedy.

But then the U.S. economy tanked. "During an economic boom, it was easy to make fun of a guy who fired people because jobs weren't hard to come by," says Mr. Reitman, who also wrote the screenplay. "But suddenly, when we were scouting last fall, those scenes didn't seem to still reflect the times."

"We saw it much more as a satirical film when we started the project," says Tom Pollock, who ran Universal Pictures in the 1990s and whose production company co-financed the film with Paramount. "As the country started shedding jobs, the satire became less satiric and more tragic."

Although Mr. Reitman was no stranger to satire about unlikeable people—his "Thank You for Smoking" was about tobacco lobbyists—he recognized he had a problem, and pushed the producers and crew to adopt an unusual strategy.

He slashed some of the dialogue from the firing scenes and then replaced the actors with real people from the region who had lost their jobs—and wanted to talk about it on camera. He placed casting calls in local newspapers to solicit participation. "It was like nothing I've ever directed—we were dancing with people's real lives," says Mr. Reitman, who featured 22 people in the movie, using their personal experiences to ad-lib and role-play being fired. "They were saying things I would never even think to write."

Jason Reitman on the set of 'Up in the Air.'

Mr. Reitman, 32 years old, is a child of Hollywood, the son of filmmaker Ivan Reitman, who directed "Ghostbusters" and many other films. Like "Animal House," which his dad co-produced, Mr. Reitman's "Juno" was a blockbuster take on youth culture, but with "Up in the Air," Mr. Reitman is dealing with grown-up issues: the recession and the rootless footsoldiers of corporate America, marching through airports, racking up awards-program points and one-night stands.

Mr. Reitman spent six years on the script, loosely based on the Walter Kirn novel by the same name. "Reading the script is like watching myself grow up," he says. "I wrote the first 30 pages when I was single, living in an apartment, the next 40 when I was married and about to be a father, and the last 60 when I had a mortgage, a kid, and some unusual success with 'Juno.'"

At $25 million, "Up in the Air" costs more than three times what his two previous films did, and stars George Clooney, Hollywood's reigning king of romantic comedy (though not always of the box office), as the consultant, Ryan Bingham. Mr. Reitman says he wrote much of the script with specific actors in mind, including Vera Farmiga, who plays Alex, the seductive love interest. Anna Kendrick also co-stars: all three are getting Oscar buzz.

Mr. Reitman shot the movie in just 50 days last spring, often in real-life airports. That created some commotion, notably from having to usher Mr. Clooney through airport security several times each day.

As for attracting audiences to a movie about unemployment, Paramount sees the real-life tough economic times as something that may actually work to its advantage. "We are hoping to let the film speak for itself," says marketing co-president Megan Colligan.

'THE IMAGINARIUM OF DR. PARNASSUS'

Sony Pictures Classics ('Parnassus'); Paramount Pictures (2)

minutes and rugby isn't exactly a U.S. obsession. Warner Bros. is stressing Mr. Damon's star power and Mr. Mandela's inspirational story.

THE IMAGINARIUM OF DR. PARNASSUS

Christopher Plummer and four leads: Colin Farrell, Johnny Depp, Jude Law and Heath Ledger, whose unfinished scenes the others completed after he died.

Director Ed Wood was able to use Béla Lugosi in his film "Plan Nine From Outer Space" even though the actor died during filming. His solution: Hire his wife's chiropractor to take Lugosi's place in the missing scenes, holding a cloak over his face. When Heath Ledger died in the middle of making "Dr. Parnassus," Terry Gilliam took a higher road, replacing him with Colin Farrell, Johnny Depp and Jude Law, who stepped in to shoot the remainder of his scenes, in altered versions of his character.

Will this puzzle audiences? Fortunately for Mr. Gilliam (whose previous films include "Brazil" and "The Fisher King"), Mr. Ledger's unfinished sequences all took place on the other side of a mirror that doubles as a portal into the imagination, giving a veneer of plausibility to the swap.

A thespian twist on the Faust myth, the $30 million "Dr. Parnassus" follows a theater troupe whose leader has made a deal with the devil (played by Tom Waits—how great is that?) for immortality. Christopher Plummer plays the 1,000-year-old eponymous troupe leader.

CRAZY HEART

It's been almost 40 years since "The Last Picture Show," but this little movie could bring Jeff Bridges his first Oscar.

This feature, based on a 1987 novel by Thomas Cobb, stars Jeff Bridges as an over-the-hill honky-tonk musician with a drinking problem, a string of ex-wives and more road miles on him than a long-haul trucker. Maggie Gyllenhaal co-stars as a journalist who tries to help him get it together, and, in a comment on old country music vs. new country music, Colin Farrell plays a one-time protégé of Mr. Cobb's—a slick-sounding Nashville pretty boy named Tommy Sweet. The movie at times traces familiar themes, but a great soundtrack by T-Bone Burnett, beautiful Western scenery and the shaggy brilliance of Mr. Bridges make this a piece of classic road-movie Americana, the kind they don't make much any more.

Gary Hovland (illustrations)

What's your type? Experts offer help on picking gifts for particular readers

By Alexandra Alter and Cynthia Crossen

A 14-year-old boy who isn't interested in books unless they feature young wizards. A retired doctor who's read everything by Patrick O'Brian. An avid reader and home cook who loves literary fiction but isn't above the occasional trashy novel.

Finding the right book for the right person is one of the biggest challenges in gift-giving, and this year has offered an overwhelming range of strong choices. Lovers of literary fiction can choose from new novels by Lorrie Moore, Philip Roth, John Irving and even a posthumous work by Vladimir Nabokov. Potboiler fans have action-packed books by Dan Brown, James Patterson and Swedish mystery writer Stieg Larsson. Nonfiction, biography and current-affairs buffs have been flooded with works about Google, Winston Churchill and the financial crisis.

So The Wall Street Journal outlined six types of reader, and asked a panel of experts to suggest books for each. (Responding to one of our six, a 13-year-old girl looking to move beyond "Twilight," panelist Daphne Durham said, "Sometimes, you just have to step away from the vampires.")

In addition to Ms. Durham, who's managing editor at Amazon Books, we sought recommendations from Megan Sullivan, head buyer for the Harvard Book Store; Robert Fader, buyer for Posman Books in New York; and Elizabeth Khuri Chandler, co-founder of Goodreads.com, a Web site for book lovers.

What would be the perfect book for...

A 45-year-old mother of two whose hobbies are cooking and reading, mostly fiction. She has a library full of cookbooks. She likes literary fiction but doesn't mind the occasional good trashy read.

An 81-year-old retired physician who likes tennis, travel and politics. He loves biography and idea-driven books such as Jared Diamond's "Guns, Germs, and Steel." He's also a fiction reader and a fan of Patrick O'Brian, George MacDonald Fraser and Dorothy Dunnett.

A 28-year-old painter and sculptor who gravitates toward science fiction and high-brow fantasy. He rereads Frank Herbert's "Dune" series every few years. He also enjoys art books and keeps a book of works by Swedish sculptor Claes Oldenburg on his bedside table.

A 13-year-old girl who plays violin and guitar. She loves "Peter and the Starcatchers" (a prequel to the Peter Pan story) and has read all the "Lemony Snicket" books. She's now reading the first book in Stephenie Meyer's "Twilight" series.

A 61-year-old grandmother who works for a nonprofit group promoting women's rights in Asia and constantly travels the globe. An avid skier and mountain biker, she loves South Asian fiction, Tracy Kidder's "Mountains Beyond Mountains" and books about international affairs.

A 14-year-old boy who loved "Harry Potter" but generally isn't an enthusiastic reader. He enjoys sports, music and videogames. When forced to read it for school, he loved "Ellen Foster."

The recommendations

GOODREADS.COM Elizabeth Khuri Chandler

THE SECRET OF EVERYTHING
Barbara O'Neal
Food-infused. A middle-age woman moves back to her childhood town in New Mexico after an accident and is drawn to the town's popular restaurant.

THE BIG BURN: TEDDY ROOSEVELT AND THE FIRE THAT SAVED AMERICA
Timothy Egan
An account of the 1910 wildfires that ravaged 1.2 million hectares and galvanized support for Roosevelt's forest-conservation movement.

FINCH
Jeff VanderMeer
Considered the high priest of the "New Weird" fantasy genre, Mr. VanderMeer skillfully pairs horror motifs with dreamlike imagery.

HUSH, HUSH
Becca Fitzpatrick
A supernatural love story involving fallen angels.

WHEN EVERYTHING CHANGED: THE AMAZING JOURNEY OF AMERICAN WOMEN FROM 1960 TO THE PRESENT
Gail Collins
An anecdote-rich social history tracing women's struggle against sexism in the past five decades.

LEVIATHAN
Scott Westerfeld
Even the most reluctant readers may be drawn into this story of Deryn Sharp, a spunky girl posing as a male soldier in the British army, and Aleksandar Ferdinand, the runaway son of the archduke of the Austro-Hungarian Empire

AMAZON.COM Daphne Durham

STIR, *Barbara Lynch*
MY NEW ORLEANS, *John Besh*
Eclectic arrays of dishes that stem from classic traditions (Italian from Ms. Lynch, Cajun from Mr. Besh) and resonate with a personal flavor that comes across in the stories they share about their craft.

WOLF HALL
Hilary Mantel
A familiar tale (the court intrigues surrounding Henry VIII) retold in a thrillingly immediate style from the perspective of Thomas Cromwell, the self-taught commoner who became one of the king's closest, and most mysterious, advisers.

THE BLDGBLOG BOOK
Geoff Manaugh
Mr. Manaugh has turned the ideas on architecture, design and fiction that enliven his blog into a book that finds an endless pleasure in imagining the possible worlds we might build, and in investigating the strange ones we already have.

EYES LIKE STARS
Lisa Mantchev
The magical art of performance, explored through the character of teen wordsmith Beatrice Shakespeare Smith, who, like Violet Baudelaire of the "Lemony Snicket" series, is a strong-willed orphan who knows her own mind.

K2
Ed Viesturs
A renowned climber on the history of humans who have failed and succeeded (himself included) in scaling the 8,600-meter peak.

PEAK
Roland Smith
An action-packed and suspenseful story about a 14-year-old boy named Peak whose ambitious father signs him on to be the youngest person to climb Mount Everest.

POSMAN BOOKS Robert Fader

THE PIONEER WOMAN COOKS
Ree Drummond
A wry and unpretentious memoir/cookbook by a former vegetarian who married a cattle rancher.

A TERRIBLE SPLENDOR
Marshall Jon Fisher
A behind-the-scenes look at the brilliant 1937 Davis Cup match between Germany's Gottfried von Cramm and American Don Budge.

THE BOOK OF GENESIS
R. Crumb
A lushly detailed graphic retelling of the first book of the Bible by the subversive but, in this case, respectful cartoonist.

BEAUTIFUL CREATURES
Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl
Girl, curse, secret—a Southern Gothic fantasy starring two teenagers who live in a small town where they thought nothing ever happened.

THE BOAT
Nam Le
The Vietnam-born author's stories span the globe and the politics of identity.

THE HUNGER GAMES
Suzanne Collins
A twisty, creepy, tingling novel about a future America where the winner of the big reality show is the only one left alive.

HARVARD BOOK STORE Megan Sullivan

TROUBLE
Kate Christensen
College friends, grown up to be a therapist, a professor and a rock star, have their lives go haywire, wittily and sometimes darkly, in middle age.

THE FOURTH PART OF THE WORLD
Toby Lester
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Chinese voices

Author Ha Jin captures the language of a diaspora far from home

Jerry Bauer

By Alexandra Alter

The characters in Ha Jin's new story collection often speak in awkward, tinny phrases, saying things like "I felt as if a dozen awls were stabbing my heart" and "the little fox spirit really knows how to charm her man." Like the author, the characters in "A Good Fall," which is set among Chinese immigrants in the New York City borough of Queens, are exiled from their homeland but tethered to it by language.

Mr. Jin, author of 13 books, including the National Book Award-winning novel "Waiting," said he wanted the dialogue to sound slightly foreign. His characters' dislocated way of speaking also reflects Mr. Jin's roots and evolution as a writer. Mr. Jin, who once served in China's People's Liberation Army, went to the U.S. in 1985 to do his doctoral work at Brandeis University and has not returned to mainland China in 24 years. He writes in English, but sets most of his stories in China or among Chinese speakers, so he often draws on his native Mandarin for idioms and metaphors.

> 'I can't sever my ties with China completely.'

To keep up ties with Chinese speakers, he translates some of his books into Mandarin himself. Some of his stories, which occasionally deal with political oppression in China, have been banned there. His previous short-story collection, "The Bridegroom," depicts the Chinese government as corrupt and authoritarian; "The Crazed" takes place during the tense buildup to the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. Mr. Jin originally planned to return to China after completing his dissertation, but decided to stay in the U.S. after the Chinese government's action against the protesters.

"I can't sever my ties with China completely," he said. "I feel too uncomfortable to live in China, but I can really keep the linguistic connection."

The 12 stories in "A Good Fall," range from a piece about a distressed monk's suicidal thoughts to a story about a composer's tender relationship with his girlfriend's parakeet. Many of the plots hinge on language barriers. In "Children as Enemies," a grandfather whose grandchildren want to Americanize their Chinese names becomes irate and moves out of the house. In another story, a China-born professor at an American college panics over a mangled English phrase on his tenure application. In the title story, a young monk who hasn't been paid his salary by a Buddhist temple feels he can't sue or find other work because he doesn't speak English.

Mr. Jin says the story collection started taking shape in 2005, when he was invited to a conference in Queens held by a Chinese-language newspaper. He discovered a flourishing immigrant community and began visiting regularly to gather material for a short-story collection. Mr. Jin, who lives in Foxborough, Massachusetts, made 20 trips to the neighborhood, called Flushing, visiting food stalls, bath houses, supermarkets and tea shops. For one story, he spent a couple of nights in a boarding house for new arrivals that charges $15 a night.

He also tried to absorb patterns of speech. Mr. Jin says he wanted to capture the way language evolves in diaspora, so he tweaked common Chinese expressions rather than translating them verbatim. A character whose sister back in China begs for money to buy a new car says lending her the money would be as futile as "hitting a dog with a meat ball—nothing would come back." Mr. Jin said he borrowed the image from a Chinese phrase, "hitting a dog with a pork bun," an expression that means it's useless to punish people by rewarding them. In another story, a home-nursing aid describes her boss as "stout in the midriff and with a shiny bald spot like a lake in the mouth of an extinct volcano." In Chinese, a bald head is often described as "a lake in a forest," Mr. Jin said.

Dan Frank, Mr. Jin's editor at Pantheon, said he took care to preserve those effects. "I did not want to clean up his dialogue in a way that makes it sound natural," he said.

Mr. Jin also hopes to reach a Chinese-speaking diaspora audience. He recently translated "A Good Fall" into Mandarin for China Times, a Chinese-language publisher based in Taiwan.

Translating English prose into Chinese characters is labor-intensive, but Mr. Jin says he prefers rendering it himself because he can take creative liberties, whereas translators tend to be more literal. To keep his Chinese from sounding decades out of date, Mr. Jin reads Chinese news on the Internet and contemporary work by young Chinese writers. His translations "still occasionally sound old-fashioned," he added. "Some phrases that I used when I was young, I still use."

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Masterpiece / *By Joseph Epstein*

A Biography Like No Other

"All I can tell you about the book, my dear fellow," A.J.A. Symons wrote to his brother Julian in mid-composition of "The Quest for Corvo," "is that it will be unlike any other biography ever written." He was right. Symons, 34 when he published the book in 1934, never wrote another. (He died at 41.) One begins the "The Quest for Corvo" in delight and ends it in satisfaction—one definition, surely, of a masterpiece.

Symons's biography of a little-known writer named Frederick Rolfe (1860-1913) is unique in biographical literature in bringing the reader in on how the biographer knows what he knows about his subject; and in owning up to what he doesn't know or feels cannot be known. "The Quest for Corvo" is biography in the form of a detective story, and as such it is riveting.

The surest formula for a masterpiece biography—of which there are not that many—is an extraordinary human being writing about a great one. In "The Quest for Corvo" we have an utterly charming man writing on a madly eccentric one. "Charlatan or Genius?" is the subtitle, and when one has finished reading the book one is inclined to conclude that Rolfe was fully both.

Rolfe was a failed painter, photographer, musician and, most devastatingly of all to him, a born Anglican who failed to achieve priesthood in the Catholic Church. (He claimed never to have met an honest Catholic, yet, in a characteristic touch, added, "if I were not Catholic I shouldn't be anything at all.") Toward the end of his life, he signed himself Fr. Rolfe, hoping to be mistaken for a priest.

What Rolfe was, indisputably, was an immensely talented writer. He wrote no great books, though his "Hadrian the Seventh," a brilliant fantasy in which he imagines a character obviously based on himself being made pope after the College of Cardinals can't decide on a worthy candidate, has gone through many printings since his death. A remarkable stylist, Rolfe wrote with precision and high comic flourish.

"The Quest for Corvo" begins with Symons chatting with a friend who tells him about Rolfe's "Hadrian the Seventh." Symons reads it and is so struck by it that he is determined to learn more about its author and to search out anything else by him. At the time, Symons was working on a book of his own—A Select Bibliography and History of the Books of the Nineties, with Notes on Their Authors, which he never completed—and was the secretary of the First Edition Club in London. Later, with the French gourmet and wine merchant Andre Simon, he founded the Wine and Food Society. Symons was dedicated to elegant acquisitions and good living. At his life's end he said, "No one so poor has lived so well." Good living and self-doubt prevented him from writing another book, while Rolfe continued to produce under the most penurious conditions.

Symons's biography takes the

Christopher Serra

form of a continual connecting of the dots, filling in gaps through Symons's encounters with Rolfe's former friends and those with whom he had business dealings. Chance plays a large role, as Symons is led from one to another of Rolfe's connections. "Mr. Pirie-Gordon was the missing link between Rolfe's middle and his later years," Symons writes. "I was able to piece the story together, to watch another rotation of the wheel to which Rolfe was bound."

One of the book's special pleasures is in Symons's portraits of the extraordinary characters who offered their hands to Rolfe only, inevitably, to have them bitten. Among these are splendid miniatures of now-forgotten but once-important English men of letters and publishers, among them Shane Leslie and the religious novelist Robert Hugh Benson. Most extraordinary of all is the astonishing Maundy Gregory, who buys a Rolfe letter from Symons and later himself turns up several of Rolfe's missing manuscripts. The mysteriously wealthy Gregory, though Symons was unaware of it, was a bagman for David Lloyd George, selling knighthoods and other honors for the right price.

"The Quest for Corvo," as Symons notes, is in part a story of human benevolence. Men and women were attracted to Rolfe, despite all that was off-putting about him. The Duchess of Sforza-Cesarini, who gave him an allowance, also conferred upon Rolfe, or so he claimed, the title of Baron Corvo. But Rolfe was a genuine paranoid—a paranoid who made his own enemies, and did his utmost to keep them.

He was a sponger, a liar, a homosexual dedicated to suborning the innocent, a fantasist ever ready, as Symons has it, to add "new turrets" to "his castles in the air," yet in his dedication to his pretensions, in his utter friendlessness—he dedicated one of his books to "the Divine Friend much desired," a want ad if ever there was one—Rolfe was also unspeakably sad.

Refreshingly un-Freudian, "The Quest for Corvo" makes scant reference to Rolfe's parents, his upbringing, the formation of his character. Rolfe enters Symons's book fully formed, a monster not in the least sacred. "Though the peculiar inner energy which possessed Fr. Rolfe is beyond analysis," Symons writes, "the external events of his life, and his reactions to them, can be collated and made comprehensible."

Rolfe's troubles began, Symons concludes, with his homosexuality, his knowledge that he was not like most men, which fed into his paranoia. "His forbidden love," Symons writes, "was a source of weakness, but hate could make him strong." Rolfe was hard to do justice to, but Symons, out of the largeness of his imagination, in the end finds him a figure from whom "it is unjust . . . to withhold admiration and pity," a judgment that seems exactly right.

A slender book, an odd book, a completely original book, "The Quest for Corvo" also represents a new method of writing biography that has never been copied. That it hasn't been, that perhaps it cannot be without the keen mind that Symons brought to it, is but another mark of its standing as a masterpiece.

Mr. Epstein's collection of stories "The Love Song of A. Jerome Minkoff" will be published in the spring by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Bookshelf / *By Moira Hodgson*

Student Butcher, Wayward Wife

Julie Powell was a bored secretary in a dead-end job when she had the clever idea of cooking every recipe from Julia Child's "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" in one year. It started as a blog, became a best-selling memoir, "Julie and Julia," and was followed by a film starring Meryl Streep. Ms. Powell established herself as a witty, articulate writer with an original voice.

Cleaving: A Story of Marriage, Meat and Obsession
By Julie Powell
(Little, Brown, 307 pages, $24.99)

The end of "Julie and Julia" left the author exhausted but triumphant after preparing 524 dishes of very rich French food. She had turned 30, put on a few pounds and was contemplating having a baby with Eric, her long-suffering husband and college sweetheart, her anchor throughout the project.

But now, in Ms. Powell's "Cleaving," two years have passed, and things have changed. Despite her phenomenal literary success, her 10-year marriage to Eric is falling apart. She is having a sado-masochistic affair with "D," an old flame, whom she ends up stalking. Oh, and she has decided to become a butcher's apprentice.

Ms. Powell's travails at Fleisher's, a small, family-owned butcher shop near Kingston, N.Y., in the Catskills, provide her with great material. She finds solace from her obsessive love affair by learning how to cut pork chops, make crown roasts, break down whole lambs and bone turkeys. "Bafflingly, when I think 'sanctuary,' what comes to mind is the gleam of steel and tile, the moist red of a lamb roast, the pungent smell of aging beef, and the grip of a knife in my hand."

It's a bit of a stretch when she invokes Jack the Ripper to explain why she became a butcher. "In a weird way, I see the butchering part of what Jack did as separate from the killing, frenzy, the rage. And I see it as maybe containing the last kernel of sanity still left to him. Maybe it was his forlorn way of trying to fit the pieces back together, or at least understand how they once fit."

"Cleaving" reminds me of another memoir, Bill Buford's "Heat," a culinary odyssey that includes a stint in Italy with a mad, Dante-quoting butcher. A strong stomach is required when you read about the butchering. Like Mr. Buford, Ms. Powell makes headcheese, "maybe the most unfortunate misnomer in the culinary world." Cheese, after all, has nothing to do with the gelatinous cold-cuts made with all the edible bits found above the neck of a pig or cow. For headcheese from a pig, she saws its head in half and uses her fingers to scoop out the brains, "pale and moist like oysters in their shells." Her description of a pig slaughter is beautifully written. After the animal has been stunned and a pick has been thrust into its carotid artery, she writes, "the creature's legs work furiously as blood jets from its throat. The force of its jerking spins it around in circles like a spasmodic break-dancer. All in eerie silence."

Ms. Powell juxtaposes the details of her butcheringwith her obsession with the dreaded "D." She loves being bruised and roughed up by him. It makes her feel "fierce, strong—emancipated." How could this be so? "The first time he slapped me across the face, after all, I was bound in trusses I'd given him." Readers may find such passages disturbing, as they are no doubt meant to be.

The author shows a certain sadistic streak of her own in the way she treats Eric. A tiny detail says it all. Did she really have to write that, when "D," in one of their trysts, unzips Ms. Powell's black high-heeled boots, he finds that she is wearing what she calls "stupid argyle socks," adding "Eric's socks, actually"?

Moments like that strain the reader's sympathy, as does Ms. Powell's apparent self-satisfaction. "It makes me feel powerful and smart and, yes, a little sexy to cut up oxtails," she thinks as she packs them up to take home for a meal with Eric. One morning she is working on a piece of liver for a Valentine's Day dinner with her beleaguered husband when a female customer comes in and asks for boneless skinless chicken breasts. The woman is appalled by the sight of Ms. Powell's blood-smeared face and the brown gunk under her fingernails. Ms. Powell is equally appalled by the request. "I am offended by the very notion of skinless boneless chicken breasts, and the boring sticklike women who eat them."

You get the point. Julie is a hot, red-blooded girl, and she not only likes liver but she'll eat it raw—as she does on a trip visiting butchers in Argentina, Tanzania and Ukraine. This journey, which comes late in the book, feels like an add-on.

Why did she learn to be a butcher? Performing the job seems to give her a strange sort of pleasure, and it is not unrelated to her genuine culinary passions. But one has to wonder. Her debut book was authentic and disarmingly honest, and it originated in a task that she had assigned herself: Spend a year cooking Julia Child's recipes. "Cleaving" often feels forced, like a chore performed to please an agent, a publisher and maybe a movie studio. Ms. Powell is a wonderful prose writer—here's hoping that her next project makes better use of her skills.

Ms. Hodgson is the author of a memoir, "It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time," published by Nan A. Talese/Doubleday.

time off

by William Westbrook

Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra (cartoon); City Contemporary Dance Company ('Dao'); Taipei Fine Arts Museum (Huang); Steve Gullick/Matador (Yo)

Top, Hong Kong: Cartoon music gets the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra treatment; above, Hong Kong: 'Dao-Extraordinaire'; left, Taipei: 'Huang Hai-tai, Puppet Master,' by Tseng Miin-shyong; below, Yo La Tengo rocks Asia, Australia and New Zealand.

Hong Kong

CONCERT

The Music World of Animation: The Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra applies its erhus and gehus to cartoon music, plus the theme from the videogame "Final Fantasy VIII" and Henry Mancini's "Pink Panther" theme. The cartoons range in vintage from 1937 ("Snow White") to 2001 ("Shrek"), and cover the globe from the U.S. to Japan (including "Chibi Maruko-chan" and "Doraemon") to China ("Three Monks").

Hong Kong Cultural Centre,
10 Salisbury Rd., Tsim Sha Tsui,
Kowloon; Dec. 19, 8 p.m.;
Dec. 20, 3 p.m.
Admission: HK$120 to HK$260.
☎ 852-2111-5999
Web: www.urbtix.hk

DANCE

Dao-Extraordinaire: By combining the fundamental concepts of Taoism, the ancient Chinese developed a harmonious view of the universe. Plus you can dance to it. Loosely adapted from the Chinese creation myth, this epic dance is the grand finale of the City Contemporary Dance Company's 30th anniversary celebration.

Kwai Tsing Theatre Auditorium,
12 Hing Ning Rd., Kwai Chung,
New Territories; Dec. 4 and 5,
8 p.m.
Admission: HK$140 HK$500.
☎ 852-2111-5999
Web: www.urbtix.hk

Singapore

CONCERT

Christmas Concert: The Singapore Symphony Orchestra, with the Singapore Symphony Children's Choir and Lim Yau conducting, offers its annual chance to sing along with some carols. The works without audience participation include Christian Victor Hely-Hutchinson's "A Carol Symphony," Bob Krogstad's "Christmas at the Movies" and "The Bells of Christmas" and Mendelssohn's "Fair Melusina" overture, whose Christmas connection is not immediately apparent.

Victoria Concert Hall,
11 Empress Place,
Dec. 17 to 19, 8 p.m.
Admission: S$16 to S$60.
☎ 65-6348-5555
Web: www.sistic.com.sg

Taipei

EXHIBITION

Face's Talk—An Exhibition of Portraits: "Heads of Taiwan," as the exhibition's Chinese title translates literally, represents 10 years' labor by photographer Tseng Miin-shyong. The 117 heads belong to some of Taiwan's leading literary figures, artists, musicians, religious figures, performing artists and politicians, as well as a new generation of innovators.

Taipei Fine Arts Museum,
181 Zhong Shan North Rd.,
Section 3; to Jan. 17, 9:30 a.m. to
5:30 p.m., to 8:30 p.m. Saturdays;
closed Mondays
Admission: NT$30.
☎ 886-2-2595-7656
Web: www.tfam.museum

Tour: Asia

CONCERT

Gil Shaham: The American violinist's December performances will be with the International Sejong Soloists, in programs that include a little Bach, a Haydn violin concerto or two, the Mendelssohn octet and contemporary composer Osvaldo Golijov's tribute to his fellow Argentine Astor Piazzolla, "Last Round." In Singapore in January, Mr. Shahan will play Prokofiev's second concerto with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra in an all-Russian concert.

Seoul: Grand Theatre, Sejong Center, 81-3 Sejong-no, Jongno-gu; Dec. 11, 7:30 p.m.
Admission: 30,000 won to 110,000 won.
☎ 82-2-399-1114
Web: www.sejongpac.or.kr
Shanghai: Shanghai Concert Hall, 523 Yan'an Rd., Huangpu District; Dec. 13, 7:30 p.m.
Admission: 100 yuan to 580 yuan.
☎ 86-21-6217-2426
Web: www.culture.sh.cn
Beijing: National Centre for the Performing Arts,
2 Chang An Jie, Xichen District; Dec. 15, 7:30 p.m.
Admission: 180 yuan to 880 yuan.
☎ 86-10-6417-7845
Web: www.piao.com.cn
Taipei: National Chiang Kai-shek Cultural Center, 21-1 Chungshan South Rd.; Dec. 18, 7:30 p.m.
Admission: NT$1,200 to NT$4,800.
☎ 886-2-2341-9898
Web: www.ntch.edu.tw
Singapore: Esplanade Concert Hall, 1 Esplanade Drive; Jan. 9, 7:30 p.m.
Admission: S$20 to S$125.
☎ 65-6348-5555
Web: www.sistic.com

Tour: Asia/Australia

CONCERT

Yo La Tengo: After 25 years this indie rock band headed by Ira Kaplan and Georgia Hubley, husband and wife, can still confidently turn out a song that sounds like nothing it's done before. Likewise with album titles: "Popular Songs," released in September, followed "I Am Not Afraid of You and I Will Beat Your Ass." Other stops include Osaka, Auckland and Perth; see www.yolatengo.com/schedule.html.

Tokyo: Shinagawa Prince Stellar Ball, Shinagawa Prince Hotel,
4-10-30 Takanawa, Minato-ku;
Dec. 17, 7 p.m.
Admission: 6,000 yen.
☎ 81-3-3444-6751
Web: www.smash-jpn.com
Taipei: Legacy, Pate Road, Huashan Cultural-Creative Park; Dec. 19, 8 p.m.
Admission: NT$1,800 and NT$2,000.
☎ 886-2-2341-9898
Web: www.ticket.com.tw
Melbourne: Forum Melbourne,
154 Flinders St.; Feb. 12, 8:30 p.m.
Admission: A$54.20.
Sydney: Metro Theater,
624 George St.; Feb. 18, 8 p.m.
Admission: A$53.10.
☎ 61-132-849
Web: www.ticketek.com.au

Tour: China

SPORTS

Harlem Globetrotters: The Chicago-born basketball team with the New York name has played more than 25,000 games and won 98% of them, mostly without looking too worried.

Shanghai: Yuanshen Sports Centre, 655 Yuanshen Rd., Pudong District; Dec. 12, 2 p.m. and 7 p.m.
Admission: 80 yuan to 400 yuan.
☎ 86-21-5150-9199
Web: en.piao.com.cn/shanghai
Beijing: Wukesong Arena, 12 Xicui Rd., Haidian District; Dec. 13, 8 p.m.
Admission: 80 yuan to 380 yuan.
☎ 86-10-6417-7845
Web: www.piao.com.cn